

ISBN 978-1-894699-62-4

Ryan Doherty, Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, and James Campbell: "Cyclorama Lyla Rye" (ex. Catalogue). Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 2014.

Introduction

Ryan Doherty

Cyclorama is the happy outcome of a collaboration between the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (SAAG), the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington (VAC), and the multi-talented artist, Lyla Rye. Featuring still images, single channel videos, and mixed media installations, *Cyclorama* looks to the theatrical curtain as a device to conflate illusion and reality, dreaming and wakefulness, audience and participant. Between the "cyclorama," typically a concave curtain at the rear, and the front curtains framing the scene, the stage becomes a liminal zone between everyday life and the imaginary world of the play.

In the 18th century, the critic and philosopher Denis Diderot posited that this three-walled box we call a stage did indeed have a fourth, if invisible, wall: an imaginary boundary that separated the fictional world from the audience. Obliterating the fourth wall has since become an objective of theorists, critics, and artists alike from playwrights Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud to cinematic movements such as New Wave and Dogme 95. Provoking an awareness of the stage, its actors, and its narrative as being a part of the same reality as the audience was a vital strategy to achieving any semblance of honest and affective experiences. For Lyla Rye, *Cyclorama* represents an effort to question the dichotomy of these two positions:

I want my installations to become stage sets, where the viewer is cast as actor, free to imagine the plot. Conceptually, I want the encounter to be like watching a theatre performance from behind the scenes. I hope to fully engage the viewer in the illusion, while also allowing them to be immediately aware of the artifice involved.

This catalogue serves to extend the exhibitions held at SAAG and VAC. It includes a host of beautiful images as well as two thoughtful essays for which we are thankful. The first, by award-winning author Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, surveys the exhibition in its entirety. Her essay deftly brings together Rye's interests in cinematography, memory, the domestic, and recent video work inspired by Buster Keaton's silent films, a practice uniquely situated between the theatrical vaudeville tradition, the beginning of cinematic conventions, and the spectacle and technical magic of moving pictures. The second, by VAC Director, James Campbell, examines Rye's work *Memory Palace*—a series of "pop-up" tarpaulin

rooms that draw upon notions of spatial memory and the transitory nature of stage sets. Campbell moves us through Rye's vividly familiar architectural composition, revealing the complexities of its installation and emphasizing how the spaces trigger our recollection. Both essays reveal Rye's art as a timely investigation, urging us to consider our physical relationship to film and movement through constructed space, whether architectural or imaginary.

With any project of this scope there are many individuals to whom we owe a debt of gratitude. Thanks to staff at both SAAG and VAC for their tireless efforts in realizing the exhibition at every stage. Rye's installations are uniquely complex and the expertise and patience they require was delivered with enthusiasm. We offer thanks to Shani K Parsons who designed this inventive publication. Her nuanced understanding of Rye's work has resulted in a book that reflects the artist's practice in engaging ways.

Most of all, we offer our gratitude and congratulations to Lyla Rye, whose vision and collaborative spirit have resulted in two remarkable exhibitions culminating in this distinctive publication. It has been both a pleasure and a privilege to work with such an exceptional and committed artist and we hope this book serves her well.

CYCLORAMA | LYLA RYE

By Caoimhe Morgan-Feir

It remains one of the most famous images from the silent-film era: Buster Keaton, eyes downcast, standing in shock as a building front has just collapsed around him. His life narrowly spared by his serendipitous position beneath the façade's only open window, Keaton looks around at the ground as the house in the background sits splayed open. From the 1928 film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, this image contains an architectural structure that occurs time and again in Keaton's films: the bisected house. With the exterior wall missing, the building appears more like a dollhouse or theatre set than anything functional or livable. But the bisected house is more than just an iconic gag; it marks a crossroads of histories. Lyla Rye taps into and expands upon this architectural form, using silent film footage, photography and installation to grapple with notions of domesticity, theatre, surveillance and the anxieties that these terrains contain. Rent apart, houses can be watched and peered into; Rye knows this, and makes a voyeur of the visitor.

The House Haunted (2011) offers one of the clearest examples of Rye's interest in architecture as a framing device. The work pulls from another Keaton film, *The Haunted House* (1921), but, as the slightly differing titles suggest, the original film has been rearranged. Merging footage, Rye creates a vantage point that enables viewers to observe every room of the house. She assembles a digital panopticon. Footage from each room is compiled and arranged in relation to other rooms. In the lower right the basement footage plays, slightly above it the living room footage plays, slightly above it sits the bedroom footage and so on. Viewers can follow the characters through the house as they slip, dodge and try to evade each other in true Vaudevillian caper style. The house has been sliced open, allowing for a spatial arrangement of narrative.

In this schematic arrangement, or rearrangement, Rye focuses the viewer's attention on a central element of the film: the building and its furnishings. Beyond serving as the primary frame for the piece, elements of the house routinely spur the plot forward—the house effectively functions as protagonist. Retracting stairs, trap doors and exploding books are frequently more pivotal and productive than Keaton's hapless bank teller character (who accidentally stumbles from one calamity into another). The objects are living, active entities. Rye plays into and exaggerates this tendency beyond *The House Haunted*. Each video work in Rye's exhibition *Cyclorama* hinges on architectural structures and objects, such as curtains and spotlights, which lead both characters and visitors into the narratives.

Even without source material that blurs boundaries, Rye uses objects to guide visitors in unexpected ways. *Memory Palace* (2012) consists of little more than tarpaulins, bungee cords and fans. And yet, despite the flimsiness of these materials, Rye fashions a structure that functions similarly to the digitally replicated building in *The House Haunted*. *Memory Palace* offers a kind of

passage, where one tarpaulin-strung room leads into the next. Visitors are directed by space, and led through rooms. Admittedly, though, the pacing differs entirely from *The House Haunted*, where characters are forced into action within Keaton's world. In *Memory Palace*, visitors can take their time; there are no bands or burglars or opera troupes waiting around the corner, but visitors are driven through all the same. As participants within *Memory Palace*, we may not be agitated, but we are certainly activated.

Within *Spectregraph* (2011), also built with footage from *The Haunted House*, inanimate objects retain their importance, but become far more ominous. Rather than showing the entire house, *Spectregraph* focuses exclusively on the entry hall and layers all activity together, so that it occurs simultaneously. With the colours inverted, Keaton's character—garbed in ghostly white—appears dotted around the room, running up and sliding down the stairs, walking in and out of a side door and circling the landing all at once. Mixed into the slowly morphing chaos, hooded black figures (inverted “ghosts” dressed in bed sheets) slowly march across the screen. Slowed down, the jaunty, playful music that accompanied the film becomes dissonant and fumbling, with the strings and piano crashing into one another. The piece seems stretched and tortured—pained, even. Again, though, Rye's focus points to Keaton's status as one object among many. This is largely achieved through the overlapping within *Spectregraph*. Few things can undercut the centrality of the singular protagonist more than having them appear three or four times within a frame. With Keaton's scattered around the room, viewers focus less on any individual character and more on the scene in its totality.

Within the context of the 1920s, this emphasis in Keaton's films on objects driving the plot rather than, for example, emotionally-based character motivations, connects with a theme in many turn-of-the-century films: anxieties surrounding technological sovereignty and supremacy. As film historian James Lastra notes, “Keaton succeeds when he becomes a ‘thing among things,’ showing us how the movies rehearse our experience of human alienation and technological sovereignty.”¹ *The Haunted House* does not address industrialization as directly as Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) or Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), but the same fears are evident and brought into the domestic realm. The position of humans at the centre of the universe, the centre of the narrative, has been called into question.

Rye uses this footage almost a century later, though, and new concerns have arisen. The dangers of alienation, while still present, have been joined—if not superseded—by those of omnipresent surveillance, and a resultant lack of privacy. Surprisingly, she manages to transition into contemporary concerns within *Cyclorama* using a seemingly understated object: the dollhouse.

Of course, dollhouses did not emerge alongside silent films. While some evidence suggests that miniatures have existed since antiquity, dollhouses as we think of them presently have been made since the mid-16th century.² But they do

have a connection with Keaton: their shared glory days during the 1920s. Perhaps there was something in the air. As Buster Keaton began to garner major Hollywood success in the early 1920s, English architect Sir Edwin Lutyens began to work on Queen Mary's Dollhouse, the most famous of all dollhouses. Now, some ninety years later, Rye begins to resurrect the two in tandem. In connecting dollhouses and Keaton, Rye centers on some of the connections, and tensions, between the realms of the domestic and the theatrical that have existed since the turn of the century. Writing in the 1930s, theorist Walter Benjamin noted a specific function accorded to the domestic realm: "In the interior, [modern man] brings together the far away and the long ago. His living room is a box in the theatre of the world."³ The dollhouse reverses this structure. It transforms the domestic realm into a stage whereupon imaginary lives are enacted, and potential futures are played out. The dollhouse is a stage for the living rooms of the world.

While the typical dollhouse mirrors the opened and bisected house in form, their functions are widely different. Keaton's films were intended for public viewing; dollhouses, on the other hand, are generally private. This distinction renders Rye's photographic series, *Projection* (2007), much more intimate. The photographs depict a handmade, colorfully painted dollhouse from various depths and angles. As a small child plays with a house, reaching in and arranging, light projections dance across her back and highlight certain sections. Each room is painted a different color—pink, yellow, blue and green. As the light spills into the rooms, the shadows, which slice across the house at angles, become inky black. These angling shadows and blocks of colour abstract the photographs, and push them into the realm of the spectral and haunting. Although the projection spotlights areas of the house, it offers more confusion than clarity.

In *Upstage* (2011), surveillance morphs into something else: performance. The installation work consists of two elements: the first is a hanging curtain, reminiscent of theatre curtains, onto which a black and white proscenium arch is projected. Beneath this curtain, as if on a stage, projected footage shows a figure entering a door, after which a bright spotlight washes out the installation's centre. Stepping closer to the work, the viewer's shadow takes over centre stage. This process of transition, of viewers infiltrating the work itself, mirrors the plot of the original film, Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), from which the footage was culled. Keaton's character, a sleeping film projectionist, dreams of entering a movie, wherein he jumps from one scene to another. Rye repurposes these scenes to allow viewers this experience; one moment they are in an indigo-tinted walled garden, while in the next they occupy a crimson-coloured desert. Their actions become the narrative; they become the shadow puppet star. All of a sudden, the wave of an arm or a turn of the head becomes a part of the work—the viewer, too, becomes an object among objects. They transform from observer to the observed.

In Rye's *Cyclorama* exhibition, viewers vacillate between twinned positions:

looking at space, and being looked at within space. Rye makes this transition through a subtle undoing. Keaton's original films are restructured and reframed so that the already blurred lines between subject and object become indecipherable. Narrative becomes decentred, largely through spatial structures. When connected with images of the dollhouse, the bisected building, open and visible, hits closer to home. It seems more revealing, perhaps even more intrusive. The viewers' position shifts. Where they once observed the theatrical, they now observe the personal. Then, finally, the viewer becomes Keaton, the performer. Now knowing what being on display entails, they can create their own show. This shift happens by inches, but moves us by miles.

1. James Lastra, "Buñuel, Bataille, and Buster, or, the surrealist life of things," *Critical Quarterly* 51.2 (2009): 36.
2. Flora Jacobs, *A History of Doll's Houses* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 9-15.
3. Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 38.

Memory Palace

by James Campbell

Put whatever you can into the cupboard of your mind as if you were trying to fill a cup.

The preceding words were penned by St. Thomas Aquinas in a mid-13th century letter to his brother, John. He talks of memory. He goes on to provide guidance to his brother as to ways in which we can strengthen our memory, enhance our ability to access moments past: “a man should arrange in an orderly way the things he wishes to hold by memory under his consideration, so that from one remembered thing he may progress easily to another.” Human obsession with the concept of memory, and its powerful place in our intellectual and emotional state of being, far pre-dates the 13th century. Ancient Greek and Roman treatises mapped out very specific memory enhancing techniques, as Lyla Rye notes regarding the title of her installation, *Memory Palace*: “The project title references the memory technique from ancient Greece utilizing the mind’s innate ability to remember spaces to organize large numbers of facts. By imagining facts to be remembered in various loci around a known space, one can create a vast repository of memories through a web of spatial associations.” As we daily wander any given room or space, we consciously and unconsciously register specific objects, sounds or aromas within that space. These varied “facts” become specific to that space and initiate trigger points for our individual “repository of memories.” As Aquinas alludes, the etched and ordered retention of things we wish to hold by memory allow an easy flow from one remembered thing to another, from one place to another.

In late summer and early autumn of 2012, Rye’s *Memory Palace* occupied the third floor loft gallery of The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington in Bowmanville, Ontario. Through the simplest of means, charged by colour and light, she transformed the two tiered, upper level of a former mill built in 1905 into a portal for our personal memories. Rye created a series of seven “pop-up” rooms, constructed from tarpaulins of varied colour and shape. These rooms were suspended from the rough hewn rafters of the loft by bungee cords. These components, as the artist observes, ring of the temporary, as they are materials often “associated with construction, demolition and provisional shelters.” The materials may indeed have been transitory, however the experience of wandering those rooms was not. Rather, it was transformative.

Each room was comprised of one particular colour and a distinctive architectural form. Each shape, depending on an individual viewer’s context, might conjure a corridor, a tent, a gazebo, an arch or a shed. It was individual memory and experience that the artist hoped to ignite during our journey through the *Memory Palace*. The path from room to room was often broken by fleeting visual access to an adjoining room, or architectural elements of the loft space. This was a conscious decision in the installation, so that the seven spaces did not become a unified architectural entity for the occupant, sealed within the loft. As the artist

states, “..the work does not attempt to be architecture, but rather to remind one of rooms they might have encountered in the past.” It is with this thought in mind that I discuss Rye’s installation through my personal experience of exploring this installation.

Each room was illuminated from without by natural light through seventeen windows; eight on the floor level, and nine from the clerestory space above. The translucent character of the tarpaulins allowed this light to stream through, generating a particular glowing hue from space to space. That light washed over us as occupants, covering us in a varied palette of colours.

In one large room, the first that most of us encountered, an arched form reached up into the clerestory space. As we entered this white arched space, we became aware of the source of a constant hum. Two fans were suspended on a beam, pointing upward, their sustained gusts inflating the arched ceiling above us. An intriguing juxtaposition occurred in this space: while the arched ceiling suggested a timeless architectural element, the artist chose to create it using ordinary white tarpaulins. Did the white colour suggest marble, perhaps intending to evoke a classical temple? Yet this marble undulated rhythmically from the push of mere air. Clear light streamed through that stone. A myriad of memories were possible, sparked by the simultaneous multi-sensory absorption of light, colour, sound, motion and touch. This writer was transported to the Grand Chapel of The Palace of the Popes, in Avignon. Somehow, Rye’s arched room of plastic fibres, held aloft by cords and the wind, conjured a memory of a vast hall of white stone from the 13th century.

We then entered a corridor of red, a rich, visceral red. The colour that fell upon us here was capable of overwhelming any immediate need to ascribe architectural familiarity. We were not taken aloft in this space, as in the arch that preceded it. This was akin to a journey through an artery. A celebratory leap in primary colour occurred when we then entered a deep blue space. This was shaped much like a bedroom, its bright colour suggesting that of a child’s. Here, the blue tarpaulin shaped the illusion of dormers flanking south facing windows in the loft, and although the material covered the windows, we were immediately aware they were there. Light from other windows helped to define the rest of the room, washing a soothing blue balm over the space and those of us inside. The space conjured memories of comfort, a place full of stories read, of reassurances, and of calm.

From a cool blue interior space, suddenly into a brilliant orange tent, the type of tent found on countless campgrounds and in countless backyards. Here again, memory associations were dependent upon varied individual experience. Family camping trips, Girl Guide and Cub Scout outings, or a summer vacation night in a friend’s backyard; many such memories involve that kind of space, that shape, even that material. Closely related to the orange tent-like structure was one placed in close proximity, made of a green tarpaulin in the form of a gazebo. Associations with the summer were again present, from that familiar shape of the

backyard enclosure, enhanced by the artist's choice of green for its colour, recalling the green grass upon which the gazebo rests, and the lush foliage that surrounds it.

Again, this shift in place for the occupant, this jump from room to room, occurred only after a quick visual reminder of where we were as we wandered from one space to another. We were in an art gallery loft. We were also in a *Memory Palace*.

Rye's installation was created with the simplest of means. Temporary materials for temporary rooms. There were no specific, tangible objects, no varied "facts", placed within these spaces. These loci were void of any consciously placed memory triggers to be immediately grasped and ordered, as described by Aquinas. Yet these malleable, temporal spaces, awash in coloured light, ignited in each wanderer an immediate sensory response, and a journey into memory. Again to St. Thomas Aquinas and the letter to his sibling: "a man should apply interest and emotional energy to the things he wants to remember." The spaces created by Lyla Rye were charged with a transferable emotional energy. If memory is indeed the stuff of both emotion and intellect, perhaps it is in such palaces that the convergence occurs.